

# Religion - to be Reviewed and Re-lived

- A note to the Buddhists

Our Life here and now, its Samsaric Continuance and its Termination  
in Nirvana

**(Clarification of some misconceptions about these)**

With the month of Vesak round the corner, and with events like the birth of the Buddha-aspirant Siddhartha and his enlightenment as Sammā Sambuddha taking place during this sanctified month of May, we feel more and more the need to look into the modernist alterations and interpretations, now being attempted, of the millennia-old teachings of our Master which are embodied in the *dhamma*.

Many interested persons, both men and women of all ages, both Buddhist and non-Buddhist, even from different and distant parts of the world, are seen venturing into these. It is both exciting and adventurous. Some of these, nevertheless, turn out to be at times, to those even with a reasonable clarity of vision, bewildering and even amusing. In this article, we would at times be found repeating what we have already said months or even years ago. We crave your indulgence. But we are compelled to do so to produce a meaningful thrust in what we are attempting to do today.

Within a period of twenty-three centuries and a little more, short or long as you might consider it personally, Buddhism in Sri Lanka has gone haywire, both with regard to its teachings and their practice, both by monks and by laymen. As a religion, Buddhism primarily endeavours both to regulate and sustain the moral goodness of its adherents. This, it does in the interest of the human community as a whole, for their safety and security, happiness and prosperity and overall peace and harmony in spite of the presence of corrosive ethnic, religious and

other divisions in their midst. Buddhist teachings endeavour to do this basically via its teachings of the *panca-sīla*.

In any reformist revival of Buddhism, in the east or the west, and no matter in whose hands these take place, we feel it is most appropriate that we begin with the wisdom of the Cakkavatti in Buddhism, at the very down to earth level. One could justifiably call the story of the Universal Monarch or Cakkavatti King [*rājā cakkavattī*] an ideological Buddhist myth or legend. So far so good. We have nothing to lose. The theme is universally acceptable. Very briefly the story is as follows. This monarch is said to conquer all regions of the earth, east, west, north, south, without the use of any weapons of destruction and without the loss of any lives. He is said to be an embodiment of goodness [*dhammiko dhamma-rājā*]. Rulers of different regions who thus come under his suzerainty, willingly come up to him and humbly request that they be instructed as to how they should govern their territories.

At this stage, we discover the historically valid and universally acceptable theory of *pancasīla* which is present in the background coming to the fore in the creation of the Cakkavatti legend. To-day it is proving itself to be an integral part and vital a ingredient of any cultured and civilized society. Cakkavatti is believed to be the lay equivalent of the Buddha in the world, only one or the other being possible at any single period of time. The Cakkavatti delivers to the rulers who come to him, no matter from which particular region of the land, the five-fold ethics of the *panca-sīla*, beginning with respect for all life: *pāṇo ha hantabbo*, i.e. that no life whatsoever is to be destroyed. What is to be noted here, without fail, is the legal authority which the Cakkavatti bestows on these precepts of social ethics, giving the provincial rulers the power to legally enforce them on account of their sensibly recognized universal acceptability. The precepts, as they are delivered by the Cakkavatti, phrased as *pāṇo na hantabbo adinnaṃ na ādātabbaṃ* etc. meaning 'no life is to be destroyed, other's property is not to be robbed' maintain both their built-in dignity of acceptance on the one hand, and

the willingness of submission on the other because of their all pervasive wholesomeness to mankind. Thus, at state level, law enforcement in the land is facilitated via a degree of honesty and seriousness on the part of the state and a generous and magnanimous acceptance by the people.

On its practical side as a religion, Buddhism seems to count on the *panca-sīla* as the bed-rock of its religious culture. Numerous textual references in the Canon support this view. Dhammapada verses 245-247 are specific about the catastrophic ruin of a man who cannot keep these precepts in his day to day life in society. *Yo pāṇaṃ atipāṭeti ... Idh'ev'eso lokasmiṃ mūlaṃ khaṇati attano* runs the refrain in the Dhammapada verses referred to above. The Anguttara Nikaya, referring to the breaches of these precepts as *bhayāni* and *verāni*, calls the miscreant who breaks them a villain or *dussīlo: appahāya panca-verāni dussīlo iti vuccati*. It adds further that his life after death would invariably be degraded: *Kāyassa bhedaṃ duppanno nirayaṃ so upapajjare*.

The global society today, on its own, seems to be feeling the absolute need of the presence of these social ethics of religio-cultural value of the *panca-sīla* in our midst among the humans. Bio-Ethics Professor Peter Singer of Australia has been campaigning for many years now in favour of respect for all life via his writings like Save Animals, Animal Liberation and many more. Many others like Victoria Moran of America, with her Compassion, the Ultimate Ethic, Frances M. Lappe with her Diet For A Small Planet and Jeremy Rifkin with his Beyond Beef, Breakdown of the Cattle Culture, have all been on this trail. They all blow in the direction of the first precept of the *panca-sīla*, viz. *pāṇātipātā veramaṇī* i.e. abstinence from destruction of life. Even the world of scientific thinking is now almost converging on this. It is time the U.N. get beyond being confined within the boundaries of human life, in its pronouncement of Human Rights No.1. It is best they re-name it Human Obligations.

As for the Right of Possession, i.e, No. 2 of Human Rights, twenty-five centuries ago the Buddha declared under item No. 2 of the *panca-sīla*, i.e.

*adinnādānā-veramaṇī* that none shall dispossess another of what one has justifiably acquired which shall continue to be his rightful source of joy [*tutthi-jananakaṃ*]. The world today seems to be awakening to the need of this human consideration. We see this being globally implemented in the culturally conscious world, from Australia in the east to the U.S.A west, through their splendid concept of Neighbourhood Watch Area.

The third item of *kāmesu micchā-cārā* in the *panca-sīla* pertains to propriety in sexual behaviour of both married and unmarried persons in the human community. Norms relating to family life of parents and children on the one hand and social considerations relating to marriage on the other did contribute to the standardisation of norms of propriety in Buddhism under this precept. These may be basically Indian in outlook and Aryan in ethno-cultural points of view. Even as far back as the Aryan culture of the Vedas, incest was frowned upon. An act of errant of behaviour of an eminent Vedic god is said to have brought upon him a verdict of utter censure against his crime of incest. The norm was primarily set from a very high pedestal.

The Indian law book, the Manusmṛti, speaks of the woman as being created as the progenitor of children: *prajananārtham striyaḥ sṛṣṭāḥ*. The prestige of the woman rose high as being the mother of her husband's children. Buddhist teachings corroboratingly say that the mother is the children's friend in the home: *mātā mittam sake ghare*. Therefore the prestigious position of the woman in the home as the respected and trusted dutiful wife, mutually sharing conjugal fidelity with her husband was ideally safeguarded. For this very valid reason, Buddhism looks upon sex outside marriage as a vulgar and treacherous betrayal of marital love. Mutual consent would not permit such behaviour. Use of force would be relentlessly condemned, The texts have it as *sahasā sampiyena vā tam jannā vasalo iti*.

Honesty in word and deed which in the higher rungs of society is being referred to as transparency, specially in political circles in our neighbourhood, is

indeed a very high-grade social virtue the absence of which shatters all social contracts, and brings about all procedures to a grinding halt. This is the fourth precept of *musāvādā-veramaṇī*. We know of world governments where even persons of ministerial standing have been prosecuted and jailed for breach of this. In other cases, gentlemen of very high standing have resigned from their prestigious positions on being even distantly suspected of such misdeeds.

Finally comes sanity of human judgement which is to be cautiously safeguarded against being disrupted through use of intoxicating drugs and alcohol.